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FOREIGN OUTLOOK: OUR BORDERS ARE ABUSED

This is no starry-eyed "hands across the border" exercise in idealism. The motives of both the big bankers and the administration in saving Mexico are solid, calculated self-interest. The bankers are hoping to keep Mexico from defaulting on its foreign debts, which could sink several of the biggest U.S. banks, especially since Mexican default would undoubtedly trigger similar action by other Latin American debtor nations.

The administration's concern is rarely mentioned in public: the flood of poverty-stricken Mexicans who would come pouring over the border following a collapse of their country's economy. No amount of barbed-wire and border patrols could keep these desperate people out, and our major cities would have to be transformed into police states to identify, round up and send back the illegal immigrants.

I've seen the latest CIA National Intelligence Estimate on Mexico. It's the most sensitive intelligence report a president gets on a particular country. Here's the CIA's assessment of the connection between economic hardship and flight across the border:

"The tempo of illegal migration to the United States will probably reflect incremental changes in employment patterns and economic conditions as well as levels of stability in Mexico. Bottom-line rates will undoubtedly be high for decades, (although) significant recovery of the Mexican economy might slow migratory flows." In other words, the situation is bleak at best, and could be a disaster at worst.

Here's what the Border Patrol's assistant commissioner, Roger P. Brandemuehl, had to say: "Never before in the history of this nation have our borders been so severely tested and our immigration laws so abused...It is very alarming."

One yardstick is the number of illegals that are actually caught -- obviously a much smaller figure than the total that gets across. Last year, the Border Patrol nabbed 1.2 million illegal aliens; this year, Brandemuehl expects the number to be 1.8 million, a 50 percent increase.

This means an illegal alien is being captured every 20 seconds around the clock, 365 days a year.

It gets worse: As the Border Patrol increases its arrests, and the pressure of economic hardship in Mexico increases the desperation of the poor, border violence is also growing at an alarming rate. There were 150 serious assaults against Border Patrol agents last year. In addition, border bandits are having a field day, robbing and murdering the helpless immigrants and leaving their bodies for the patrol to find.

How bad is Mexico's situation? I've consulted experts in and out of the government, in Washington and Mexico City. I've read the pertinent internal documents. The results were not encouraging.

"The economic situation facing Mexico today is grim," an internal Senate Foreign Relations Committee report began bluntly. "Leading indicators for the Mexican economy are negative. There are virtually no positive trends."

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In addition to the huge debt and a government deficit that reached 9 percent of the gross national product last year, plus a contraction in the GNP itself, there are these negative indicators:

- Inflation, estimated at 64 percent last year, is expected to hit 100 percent in 1986.
- Living standards: Real per capita income has declined 40 percent since 1982, and now stands about where it was 25 years ago. Real wages are likely to decline again in 1986, for the fourth year in a row. This is the most serious deterioration of any major nation.
- Oil exports have suffered not only from the drastic drop in price, but from a decrease in production as well. The sudden 50 percent drop in oil prices at the first of the year will cost Mexico at least \$6 billion in foreign exchange for 1986.

What is Mexico doing about its precarious situation?

To the gratification of President Reagan, Mexican officials are doing their best to breathe new life into their economy by encouraging private enterprise and getting government out of the expensive business of controlling the economy. Reagan confided to my associate Dale Van Atta that he had made the pitch for free enterprise at his one-on-one meeting with Mexican President Miguel de la Madrid last January -- and plans to do more of the same when they meet in August.

"(President de la Madrid) cited the tradition (of) ancient laws that made it difficult for government to give freedom of private ownership and all," Reagan said. "Well, until they're ready to challenge those laws, I think they're going to have problems in today's world of readjusting and having the kind of economic growth that they could have. The potential is there."